

Poson: When Buddhism Came to Sri Lanka

Posted on



The gentle smile of the Buddha has special meaning on Poson.

Photo – Fred R. Malvenna



The Mihintale Rock, the abode of the Arahat Mahinda.

Come hither Tissa....Samanas are we, O great King, disciples of the King of Truth.
From compassion towards thee we have come hither from Jambudipa.

These words from the Mahawamsa – the great chronicle of the Sinhala people of Sri Lanka – describes the meeting of King and mendicant which so changed the history of Sri Lanka that echoes of it ring down to this day more than two thousand years later. From this meeting in the 3rd century" B.C. when King Devanampiyatissa received the message of compassion of the Buddha from Mahinda, the son of the Emperor Asoka, Sri Lanka and the Sinhala people were drawn into a stream of cultural enrichment, the monuments to which awe the visitor to this island by their sheer majesty of achievement.

It was on a Poson Poya Day – the Full Moon day in the Buddhist month of Pason (May/June) – that this epic meeting took place. No story of Sri Lanka is complete without it. King Devanampiyatissa, who was on a deer hunt with his royal entourage, met a lone deer grazing in the open. The sporting huntsman twanged his bow-string to warn the deer (which was really a mountain deity in disguise) which fleeing, led the King to the Arahat Mahinda, who had come from Jambudipa (India) with the Buddha's message of love and tolerance. History records that Devanampiyatissa, who ruled at Anuradhapura, was a friend of the Emperor Asoka of India -a great warrior who later converted to Buddhism, and made it his later mission to spread the new teaching outside India. The emperor who treated the Sri Lankan King with great esteem, had decided to gift him the Buddha's teaching, and chose his son to bear the gift.

The meeting took place at Mihintale -the valley of Mahinda-just 12 km north of the royal seat of Anuradhapura. The King returned from the hunt, a convert to the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, and so began the journey of a whole people on a new path of tolerance -a way of life that has enhanced many a time the beauty of this resplendent isle. One of the first acts of the converted King was to declare the Mihintale area a sanctuary for the animals and birds that lived there, and to this date that royal edict, given in the 3rd century B.C., is observed in Sri Lanka, with Mihintale remaining a sanctuary for wildlife and flora. Mihintale thus established claims to being among the oldest, if not the first, nature reserves in the world.

The tradition of sanctuary continues in Sri Lanka's other exotic tropical forests too, where hardly any hunting for sport is permitted. It is the same tradition which has inspired the leaders of the country to set apart nearly 10 percent of the country's forest, as forest and nature reserves. Poson, which marks this epic meeting between saint and hunter, is one of the biggest festivals of Sri Lanka. Buddhist temples and homes all over the island remember this turning point in the nation's life with religious observances and simple illuminations that adorn the night of the full moon. After the Vesak full moon in May, which marks the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha, Poson is the most important festival in the Buddhist calendar in Sri Lanka. In many a village and town, there will be small pandals, not as large as those that mark Vesak, but equally interesting for the rural skills that have gone into making them. They all depict the story of the arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

In some towns, Buddhist youth spend months ahead of the festival making giant lanterns, some nearly 15 to 20 metres high, brightly lit, revolving slowly, and again depicting on illuminated panels the story of the arrival of Buddhism. Thousands lie up to see these kuudu as they are commonly called, which remain on display for more than a week after the Poson festival. But the focus of Poson is at Anuradhapura and Mihintale.

Anuradhapura, the island's first capital, the grandeur of which was known in the court of Rome, regains some of its lost majesty when the Poson Full Moon sheds its gentle light on the ruins of the past. Thousands of devotees, White-clad, and carrying the simple offerings of fresh, fragrant flowers, joss&sticks, and coconut oil for the temple lamps, converge on the ancient shrines -hallowed by legend and history that is nearly as old as Buddhism itself -recreating scenes of the days when Anuradhapura was the centre of one of Asia's virile and enduring civilisations.

Mihintale, the mountain abode of Mahinda and his disciples, comes alive with pilgrims wending their way up the 1840 rock-hewn steps to the ancient dagaba, built to mark the place where the ascetic missionary lived.

Many climb to the summit of the Mihintale rock, the place from where Mahinda first addressed the King, which today gives a sweeping view of all Anuradhapura and its many imposing dagabas. Poson is a festival of revival and dedication to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. The thousands who throng the ancient shrines which abound in Anuradhapura and Mihintale listen to the preaching of monks under Bodhi trees decorated with prayer flags and grown old with religion spreading under them; they are links in that chain of civilisation which has so sustained the Sinhalese people through the centuries, when the fortunes of monarchs and kingdoms waned. The white draped pilgrims observing Sila—the noble eight precepts of the Buddha for righteous life who are so much a feature of Poson in every temple and pleasant glade in Anuradhapura and Mihintale, carry on a tradition of religion handed down from one generation to another, and preserved in its pristine purity, till today it offers a beacon to the seekers of a deeper reality, who come from other climes and more material ways of life.

Poson, like so many festivals of Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese people, is a festival of profound meaning, deeply felt and subdued in expression. A special event during Poson, is the Perahera—the inevitable torchlit procession of Sri Lanka's Buddhists. Like all pereheras, the Poson Perehera, too is replete with traditional drummers, dancers, devotees chanting the praises of the Buddha, making public acknowledgement of their search for refuge in the Dhamma, – the teaching of the Buddha, and the Sangha—the order of the Buddhist monks. There will always be caparisoned elephants, and jugglers, too. Often a man disguised as a lion or bear will cavort, bringing delight to the children who watch the perehera pass by. All is festivity, but not of the carnival type. There is joy in religious observance, where the colourful flags, the crack of the heralding whips, the throbs of hevisi drums, and the tinkling of elephants' bells, merging with the cymbals of musicians and the ring of anklets worn by dancers, create not a mood of revelry, but a deeply felt mood of total participation in the undying traditions of simple devotion. The echoes of "Sadhu, Sadhu" by the crowd as the perehera passes, is a contrast to the frenzied dancing one may see in many another religious festivals of the east, but is a ritual which still strikes deep chords in the hearts of the participants.

Temple bells from belfries more than 2000 years old that announce the Poson Poya even before the golden rays of the Poson moon creep over the still waters of

millenniums-old, man-made reservoirs, ring out a message to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka that is as old as the ancient city that has come to life again. The message is the same as that carved on the fallen pillars of granite -pillars that supported the temples, palaces and monasteries that have lost the battle with invading nature; the same as that expressed on the elaborately sculptured moonstones and guardstones, on the graceful curves of the mighty dagabas; it is the message of tolerance and courage, which gave strength to the pioneers of a new civilization and built those huge irrigation reservoirs, twenty centuries ago, which still serve the ancient cities and water the fields of today at Mihintale is the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the philosophy which nurtured that civilization. The gentle smile of the Buddha, which Sinhalese sculptors of old so skillfully captured on stone, remains to this day on the statues of Anuradhapura. On Poson day these smiles of kindness, tolerance and compassion take a new and richer meaning, for it is the festival of the dawn of that smile on this resplendent island -which is what Sri Lanka really means.



Devotees who observe .. Sile" relaxing on the grounds of a temple on Full Moon Day.

Photo -Fred R. Malvenna



Pilgrims in their thousands climbing the steps of Mihintale on Poson Full Moon Day.



A Buddhist fresco by George Keyt at the Gotami Vihara, Borella. Photo - Fred R. Malvenna



Painting at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara, depicting the Arhat Mahinda preaching the first Buddhist sermon to King Devanampiyatissa (left) and the converted king conducting the Buddhist monks to Anuradhapura. Photo - Fred R. Malvenna

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